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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000507

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON KIRF IZ
SUBJECT: NAJAF: GOVERNOR OPTIMISTIC ON U.S.-IRAQI
RELATIONS, ELECTION RESULTS

Classified By: Classified by: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) In a February 23 meeting, Najaf Governor As,ad abu Gulal appeared upbeat about the January 31 provincial election results and the Iraqi-U.S. relationship. Once the election results are certified, he expects the Provincial Council to be seated quickly and confided the Council may ask him to stay on as Governor. He stated he was in favor of the Iraq-U.S. Security Agreement, and would like to see the U.S. focus in Iraq shift from military to civilian assistance. End summary.

Provincial Elections: Symbol of Progress

¶2. (C) Najaf,s Governor As,ad abu Gulal told Senior Advisor Gordon Gray, Provincial Reconstruction Team officers, and emboffs February 23 that January,s peaceful elections were an important symbol of Iraq,s progress. Turnout for Najaf was 53 percent, slightly above the national average. The newly-elected 28 member Provincial Council will have a diverse mix, led by Da,wa (seven seats), ISCI (seven seats), and Sadists (six seats). The Governor said that Da,wa would not take a leadership role in the province because it wants to avoid the associated electoral vulnerability in the run-up to the national elections later this year.

¶3. (C) In the large meeting, the Governor said that his successor would be an Islamist, but over lunch he confided to the Senior Advisor that he was likely to be asked to stay on as Governor. When asked if he would serve, he replied "if the people of Najaf want me, I will not say no." He intimated there were family reasons to stay in Najaf, notwithstanding his professed preference for an ambassadorship. (Comment: He is well-liked and respected, so we assess there is a good chance he will remain Governor. End comment.)

¶4. (C) Although the Independent High Electoral Commission will postpone certifying the results until March 10, the Governor expected that it would not take long after the certification for coalitions to be cemented, and he anticipated the new Provincial Council (PC) would be seated within a week to ten days.

Security Agreement, U.S.-Iraqi Relations

¶5. (C) When asked for his thoughts on the Security Agreement, the Strategic Framework Agreement, and the future of the U.S. presence in Iraq, the Governor was positive but somewhat vague. He replied that Najaf,s clerical leadership had supported the agreements, "directly or indirectly," thereby

facilitating their acceptance. He also said that "several U.S. concessions" were important. The Governor described the resort to a vote by the Council of Representatives as the Shi,a "solution" to Sunni political maneuvering designed to box in the Shi,a. He also said if Shi,a had not supported the Security Agreement, they would have been accused of voting on Iran,s behalf.

¶6. (C) Looking ahead at what the Governor expects from the U.S.-Iraqi relationship, he replied that the U.S. should move from military to civilian assistance through re-construction and capacity building, to development and investment. He compared the future of Iraq to how Germany and Japan developed after World War II.

Religious Freedom for Iraq,s Shi,a

¶7. (C) The Governor praised the U.S. for allowing celebrations of the Arba,een holiday, which had been prohibited under Saddam, and came back to this point again. On the margins, one Provincial Council member told emboff he was thankful the U.S. military got rid of Saddam, allowing the Shi,a population in Iraq to worship freely, celebrate Shi,a holidays, and make pilgrimages to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.

Comment

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¶8. (C) The Governor painted a rosy picture of the future of the Provincial Council and U.S.-Iraqi relations. His unremarkable comments on the Security Agreement are typical of attitudes in the south, where the issue did not resonate as it did in Baghdad. For the time being, his priority appears to remain investment and economic development in and around Najaf to create jobs and expand religious and non-religious tourism. End comment.

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